FLYING ON

By Lt. Mark E. Crowe

As a nugget who had checked into the squadron just before SFARP and having finished Air Wing Fallon, I didn't feel intimidated by a night division, self-escort strike into Navy Dare. It was, however, the first time I had done a self-escort strike on goggles.

We rendezvoused and transited to the working area. I was in a close, visual formation, so I didn't have any problems maintaining my position. That all ended halfway to the IP on ingress. We had a single, heavy group that maneuvered at range. Of course, as Dash 4, I was the only person who saw one bandit spit out in the opposite direction from the other three bandits. Also, as Dash 4 and a new guy, I didn't say anything: I thought I had to have been seeing things. About 10 seconds later, which felt like an eternity, I decided it was up to me to save the division, so I peeled off to the right to take care of the lone bandit.

Of course, at this point, I had lost radar contact. I made a 90-degree turn, held that for 15 seconds, found nothing, then rejoined the flight. That's when things began to get interesting. This was the first time in the flight I really needed to use my air-to-air TACAN. By the time I was going the same direction as the rest of the flight, my TACAN showed me nine miles away. This sounded reasonable to me, so I continued at 400-plus knots to close the distance. I also cut the corner at the initial point to close it more. By the time I released my ordnance, I was only five miles in trail. There were several lights ahead of me, but I had no concept of distance, since I was flying on goggles.

I continued to drive at Dash 3 to rejoin, now at 450 knots. I was confident my TACAN was giving good information because I had double-checked to make sure the correct channel was dialed in. Unfortunately, I was so intent on catching up to my lead that I had forgotten one of the rules they teach you early in pilot training: Never bull's-eye your lead. In other words, to prevent a midair collision, never leave your nose directly on the aircraft you're trying to join. I was so task-saturated I had totally ignored that rule. As I saw the distance rapidly tick down to inside three miles, I looked down in the cockpit for a few seconds for some reason. When I looked up again, I was inside a quarter-mile behind my lead with about 200 knots of closure, headed directly for him. I aggressively maneuvered the aircraft to avoid hitting my lead, passing 300 feet to the right of his aircraft.

Once I had passed Dash 3 and given a quick, "Sorry about that" call on our tactical frequency, I pulled the throttles back to idle and took a deep breath, or five. I proceeded to lose sight again and slowed to 230 knots. My head definitely was not in the game. Not wanting to be anywhere near my lead, I was not able to rejoin the flight until they were about 20 miles from the field. I finally rejoined and came in for an uneventful landing.

After I finished bashing myself to my lead, I took a few minutes to think about just how close I had come to driving up my lead's tailpipes. With the amount of closure that existed, if I had kept my head in the cockpit another three seconds, there would have been a midair. I definitely wouldn't have survived, and I probably would have killed my lead.

Another lesson taught in the FRS deals with mission-crosscheck times. The longest mission-crosscheck times are three to five seconds for day-combat spread, meaning you can have your head in the cockpit for that amount of time before looking outside at your lead. I had my head down in the cockpit for at least seven to 10 seconds to get that close to my lead without being able to

GOGGLES

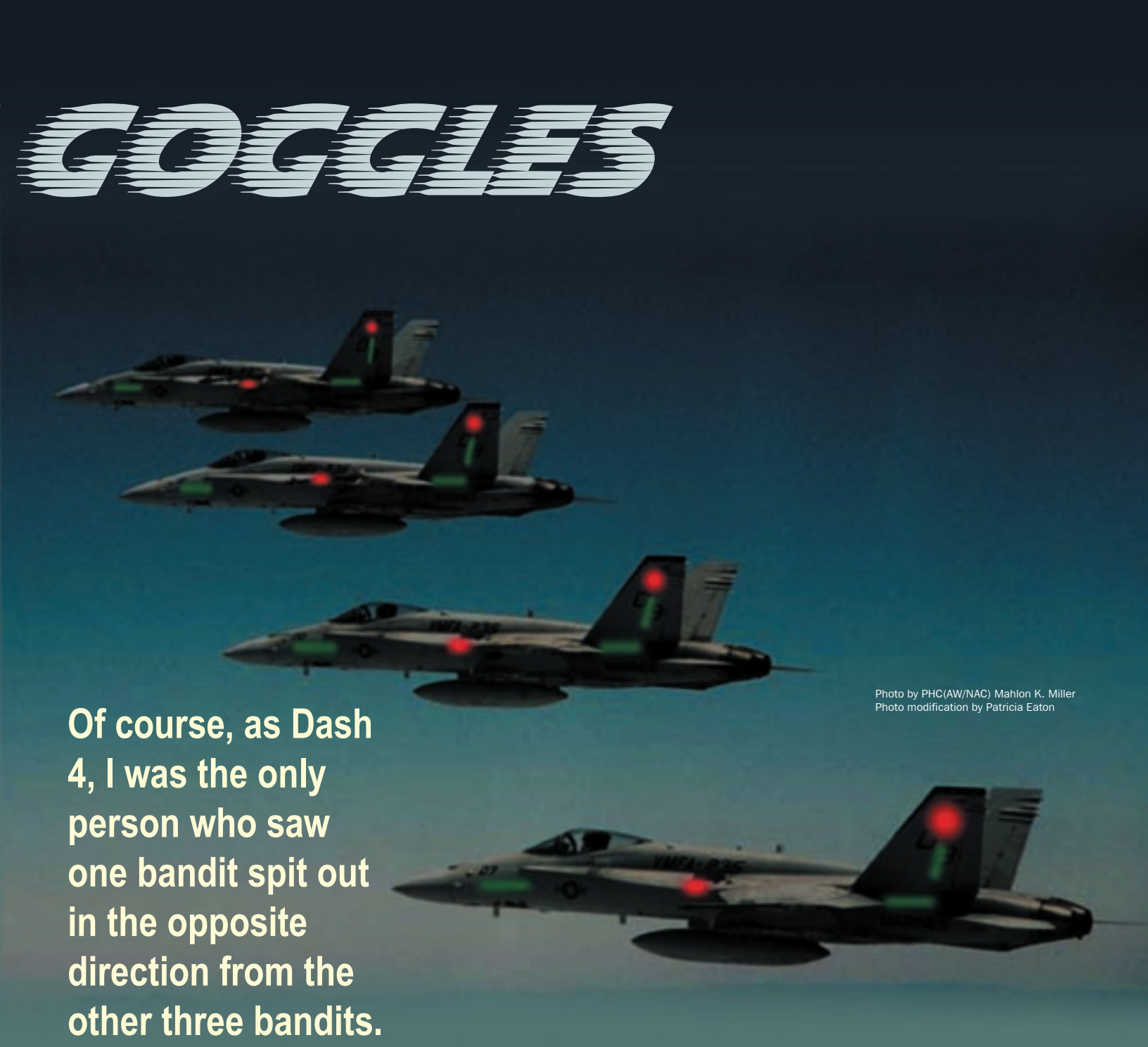

Photo by PHC(AW/NAC) Mahlon K. Miller
Photo modification by Patricia Eaton

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discern his aircraft. An additional NVG consideration, which helped aggravate the situation, is that a bright-point light source, such as the white-tail position light and the glow of the tailpipes, can easily wash out the aircraft outline within extremely close ranges. Immediately after my close call and my subsequent losing sight of my lead for the second time, I descended into the bandit's altitude block, another bad decision. I was not able to compartmentalize and make a good airborne decision until several minutes later.

After I landed, I compared the printed knee-board card flight lead had provided to the one I had made with only the pertinent information. I had switched the TACAN channels so I was getting range to the lead section and not to my lead. That one mistake, and subsequent bad headwork, had almost cost the Navy a $35-million aircraft and me, my life.

Lt. Crowe flies with VFA-87.